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Baldur the Beautiful

By

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G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1910

PS 2248
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1910

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The Knickerbocker Press, New York

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Jan. 6 11
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TO
EDWARD HUBBARD LITCHFIELD

THE ARGUMENT

THE subject-matter is furnished by the story of Baldur, as told in the Prose Edda.

In Asgard, the city of the gods, are assembled the chief Scandinavian deities, with Odin, their father and king, who from his throne overlooking space catches occasional disturbing glimpses of Muspell, the final Heaven, whence, upon the Judgment Day of the gods (Ragnarök), is to come the annihilation of the existing hierarchy. Baldur, sometimes termed the Apollo of the North, one of Odin's sons—the Æsir,—is the god of light and love, or perfection. He is warned in dreams of impending peril, and Odin endeavours to save him by deputing his mother, Frigga, to demand an oath of the universe that nothing will do him harm. All take

The Argument

this oath except the mistletoe, exempted by Frigga on account of its weakness. By means of the mistletoe, therefore, Baldur meets his death, through the knavery of Loki, the destructive principle, better known as the God of Fire. Consternation immediately prevails. Valhalla being sacred to those slain in battle, Baldur's soul goes perforce to Hel, and Hermod, another of the Æsir, mounted on Odin's wonderful eight-legged horse, is sent thither to beg his brother's ransom.

After a terrible journey, bravely endured, Hermod reaches Hel. He there obtains from its queen, Hela, Loki's abhorrent daughter, promise of the surrender of Baldur's soul, upon the condition that everything throughout the worlds shall first weep his death. If a single creature withhold its tears, Baldur is to remain in Hel, for perfect beauty and goodness are to be won only through perfect love and unanimous desire.

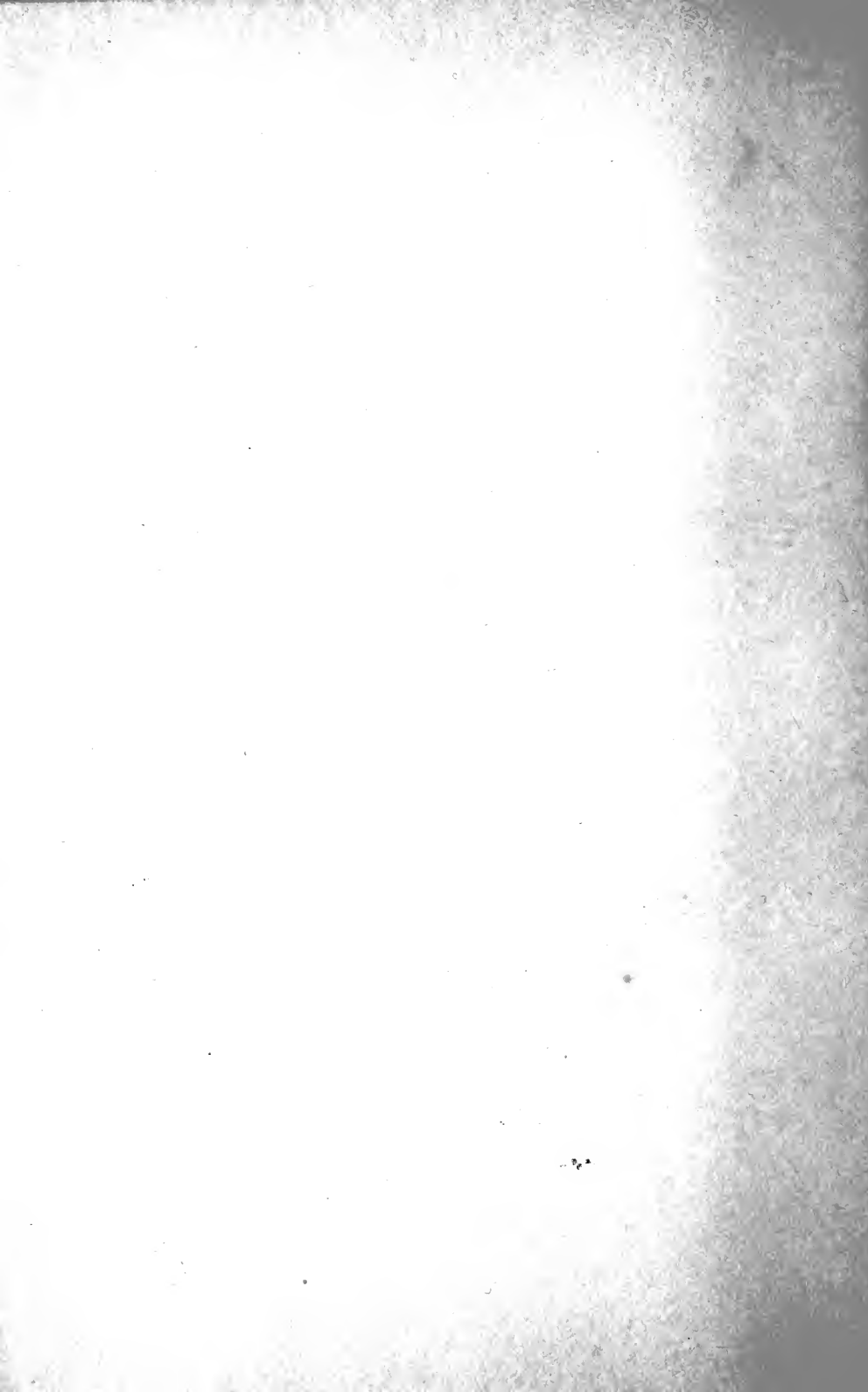
The Argument

Hermod returns to Asgard with renewed hope. Odin issues imperative command that all shall weep for Baldur, and an unprecedented lamentation follows. Loki only, disguised as the hag Thaukt, stubbornly refuses to mourn. Hela's condition being thereby violated, Baldur's soul must remain unredeemed till Ragnarök. Upon that future day, as foreseen by Odin alone, a battle will be fought in which, after incredible marvels, all the gods, including Odin himself, will be slain. The universe will then be purified by an overwhelming conflagration, and there will be created a new Earth and a new Heaven, wherein Baldur is to live for ever. Ragnarök being, however, still far distant, the world, bereft meanwhile of all that Baldur represents, continues unconcerned on its way.



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I

THE DEATH OF BALDUR

I



I

THE DEATH OF BALDUR

LONG æons past, ere yet was count of time,
At Asgard, silver city of the gods,
Bright-built, midway among the blazing suns,
By Urdar Fount, 'neath mighty Yggdrasil,
The Ash-tree Yggdrasil, whose branches stretch
As high as Heaven, whose roots strike deep as
Hel,
The Æsir held their court.

There, on a throne
Set higher than the highest leap of thought,
Was Odin, the All-Father, king of gods;
Whence, at a glance, his vast omniscient eye,
Midgard, the realm of mortals, overswept
As 't were a graven tablet at his feet;

Baldur the Beautiful

Thence, too, from Heaven's most southern edge,
betimes

Caught the swift flash, intolerably bright,
Of a flaming falchion, where, by Gimli's Hall,
Gold-roofed, Surtur, the Mighty, patient sat,
Guardian of Muspell, ageless Land of Light—
Muspell, the supreme Heaven, whence at the last
Should flow the devastating fires of death.
And Odin, the All-Father, inly sighed,
By that fell gleam foreseeing Ragnarök,
The Dusk-Day of the gods.

A space below,
His sons, the lesser gods, the Æsir, sat;
First Thor, the Thunderer, with belt unloosed,
His giant mallet like a feather weight
Reclined across his knee; him following, Njörd,
Who held the master secret of the seas
And drove the winds in leash; intrepid Tyr,
Who lost his bold right hand 'twixt Fenrir's jaws;
Hermod the Swift, whose foot no dart outsped;

The Death of Baldur

Bragi the Silver-Mouthed, whose spouse, Idun,
Stored the gold apples whereof fed the gods
When hoary Age o'ertook them, to renew
The lustre of their spring; Silent Vidar,
Sandalled with noiselessness; Hödur the Blind,
Stronger than seven; Frey, the god of Peace,
And Heimdall the White God, the Vigilant,
Warder of Heaven and of the Gjallar Horn,
Who heard the grass-blade split the buried seed,
And saw by night, a score of leagues away,
Clear as by noon; there, too, dread God of Fire,
Loki, the false of tongue, falser of heart,
The fair-faced sire of monsters—of the wolf
Fenrir, of Hela and of Jörmungard;
And there, best, brightest, wisest, of them all
The dearest loved, amid his brother gods
Baldur the Beautiful, surnamed the Good,
Moved, dazzling, like a flame.

What favoured tongue,
Wonted to godly measures, should avail

The Death of Baldur

And there, the convocation at an end,
Supine beneath deep-branching Yggdrasil,
Content they hearkened, while, to pleasure them,
Baldur the Beautiful sang songs more sweet
Than his who moved the stones of Thebes in line,
Or his whose loftier lyre built lofty Troy.
Of middays Baldur sang—of hot noontides
Thrilled through with pulsing gold; of silver
streams

Set thick with diamonds that mocked the sun;
Of ivory blossoms gleaming mid the green
Like drifted summer snow; of marshalled
clouds—

The sunset's standard bearers; of white gulls
Like jewelled arrows shot across the blue;
Of stars; of mellow moons; of all things bright
And warm and glad. Entranced the Æsir heard;
And as a hummingbird above the bloom
Light poised on murmuring wing, with accurate
thrust

Baldur the Beautiful

Of rapier-beak straight to its luscious heart
Gathers its one sweet drop, so breath by breath
They drank the honey of each dulcet song.
Then, on a day, there broke across the strain,
Marring its ecstasy, discordant notes
Of conflict and of darkness, that on ears
Used but to joy struck wonder, as when rain
Drops from an undimmed sky. Thus Baldur
sang:

DAYBREAK

Arouse thee, O Day, and reconquer thy world!
Night's challenging banners, triumphant unfurled,

Float wide on the somnolent breeze.
The valleys lie muffled and misty in sleep.
Grey shadows, like dream-ghosts, uncertainly
creep

O'er the face of the shuddering seas.
Arouse thee! Undo the enchantments of Night!

The Death of Baldur

With tremulous pulsings and breathings of light,
Pursue as he fainting retires.

Pluck the reddening rays from thine opaline
quivers!

Slant them up at the last of the stars where it
shivers

In the ash of its faltering fires.

Unfasten thy curtainings, fold upon fold.

Set wider thy floodgates of billowy gold.

Lo, the lark is awake. He is fluting thy name
From the quivering heights where the clouds are
afame,

Ere follow the full-throated choirs.

The tops of the listening trees are athrill

With desire for the stir of thy step on the hill,

For thy quickening glance o'er the hush of the
plain.

Come, crowned and engirdled with uttermost
splendour,

Thy glorious soul undismayed to surrender

Baldur the Beautiful

In a breathless outburst of magnificent pain.
Re-kindle the worlds with thy limitless light.
Stand forth in unparalleled lustre and might,
Every fear to dispel, every shadow to slay,
O invincible Day!

Then peerless Odin, bending from above,
Asked whence those melancholy notes of dread
And gloom came, darkling, to the canticle?
And Baldur, all unwilling, yet compelled
By that vast eye that had his soul in bonds,
Of haunting visions told that teased his rest,
Dire dreams, foretelling peril even of life,
Whispered by Elves of Darkness in the hours
When Sleep unlocks the inner ear to sounds
Day overspeaks—dreams ill beyond concept,
Eclipsing the sweet light of all his noons
With hideous portents, laying malignant spell
Athwart life's secret tides. Blood ebbd, breath
failed

The Death of Baldur

Before his menaced doom, though whence the
threat,

Or what the unnatural skill should compass it,
He nothing knew.

The Æsir, sore perplexed,
Pondered the monstrous tale. As when a wind
Strikes the calm sea, wrinkling its satin plane
With casual ripples that confusedly
Quiver and cross, till met and intermixt,
In gradual waves the tangled lines press on
Under one impulse goaded, each from each
So gathering impetus that, at the last,
Grown into billows swollen to giant strength,
From shore to shore they plough the ocean's
heart—

Thus dread of boded harm to Baldur, first
Uneasily the Æsir's senses stirred,
Then waxed to full possession.

Now again

Spake Odin the All-Father, king of gods;

Baldur the Beautiful

And as through angry mutterings of storm
The solemn roll of thunder breaks afar,
Resolving all sounds else to silence, so
His voice fell o'er them, and they hushed to hear.

Thus he decreed; that straightway should be
had

From fire, air, water, ether, iron, stone—
From Earth and every ore within her keep—
From all that crawled, or walked, or flew—from
all

That being had on land, in sea, or air,
In each and every star—from all wherein
Flowed blood, stirred sap, coursed ichor—yea,
from all

That moved or moved not, breathed or breathed
not, was

Or was not—oath that none would work him
harm,

Baldur the Beautiful. Thus should his days

The Death of Baldur

Be free from motivated ill. And since of all
Love's manifested fashionings, motherhood
Most unalloyed, most flawless, swiftest was
To see and do, nor spare itself in doing,
The mission this commandment to proclaim
Accorded should be Frigga—her who bore
With gladsome throes to Odin this his son,
Baldur, the best beloved.

The Æsir heard

Rejoicing, while, as ice melts under noon,
Their fear went from them. Then, as fallen
leaves

In drear dead ranks, whipped by a sudden gust,
Swirl from the ground instinct with wingèd life,
So swept they forth on that behest, to seek
The goddess in her dwelling—Fensalir,
Built of red gold, roofed o'er with silver shields—
Breathless o'ersprang the threshold, breathless
told

Their message where she sat serene and still,

Baldur the Beautiful

Her face the face of perfect motherhood,
Her deep eyes glowing with love satisfied
And full. Ere yet the rush of words was done,
Her heart had sucked it dry of argument,
Leaving but sterile sounds. And lo! before
Their anxious eyes could look again, the place
Was bare of her as of a light blown out,
And she had touched the extremest of the stars,
Bent on her wondrous task. So swift of wing
Is mother-love.

Then Baldur sang of her
This slender song—for that which fills the heart
Must voice itself, or turn to heaviness—
Though fain his insufficient lute had found
A fuller measure, fitted to the theme.

FRIGGA

Great Mother-Heart, one with infinity,
And old when stars were young,

The Death of Baldur

Though all the gods together sang of thee,
The best were still unsung.

The surge of myriad seas is in thy veins.
Thy rhythmic pulses beat
Harmonious with Heaven's eternal strains.
Its winds are in thy feet.

Ruthless as Fate thou art; a fierce typhoon
When worlds thy path defy;
Yet tender as the touch of summer moon
Where sleeping lilies lie.

Oh, love transcendent, vast as breadth and length
Of space beyond the spheres,
And mighty with the garnered grace and strength
Of all the mingled years!

As o'er the land 'twixt widest east and west
The wings of Day are spread,

Baldur the Beautiful

So life lies folded to thine ample breast,
Nourished and comforted.

The weighty oath thus had and Baldur free,
Once more was joy in Asgard. There, for
sport

Meet for high mirth, yet more to honour him
Naught now might harm, in laughter and in
love

His brother gods set Baldur in their midst,
A mark against their weapons' seasoned skill.

"Stretch forth thine arm," cried one, "that I
may speed

My lance between thy fingers." "Stand
secure,"

Another cried. "This cunning stroke of mine
Shall lift yon lock from thy resplendent brow."

"Hold fast!" cried yet a third. "My sword shall
cleave

The shadow from thy body." Thus they tried

The Death of Baldur

Their various worth, and where by chance they
missed

Their purposed goal, the weapon fell on him
Harmless as leaf on pool, or mist on flower.

And Baldur's smile shone o'er them like a star.

One only was there mid the jocund throng
Who loved not Baldur—Loki, false of tongue,
Falsar of heart. Doth Night love Day? Doth
Hate

Love Love? Rage shook him as his sharpened
blade

Shivered and brake against that shining breast,
Nor left a scar to point how true the aim;

And hurled he rock an Ajax might have doomed,
It fell as light from that uplifted brow

As 't were a shaken dewdrop. Blind with
wrath

That like red coals upon his eyelids lay,
He hastened thence, put off his godly form
And tricked him as a woman bent with years;

Baldur the Beautiful

So sought out Fensalir where Frigga sat
Serene and still, with eyes that looked afar
And saw but what was good.

“Know'st thou,” he said,
“The Æsir hold their concourse?”

“Ay. What then?”
Asked Frigga, and her voice was like a chime
Of silver bells rung in the eventide.

“Lo, this,” he answered her. “A prodigy.
Their darts they fling at Baldur—nay, forsooth,
Naught leave untried, whate'er the weapon
chance—

With vigour of the best, and varied aim,
Yet harm him not.”

“Ay ay,” the goddess said;
And her face lightened like the sunlit sea.
“Nothing can harm him, for I have the oath.”

“The oath?” cried Loki, and with careful ear

The Death of Baldur

Waited her word. "The oath? Who then hath
sworn?"

"All things," quoth Frigga, "saving one alone."

"That one?" craved Loki, and breathed not for
thirst

Of coming knowledge. "Prithee, name it me."

Calm as the light of moon on mountain fiord,
When summer sleeps, relaxed, upon the hills,
Was Frigga's smile. "A little shrub," she said,
"That grows beside Valhalla—mistletoe
They call it."

"And it dared withhold the oath?"

The deep eyes of the goddess shone with love
Wide as the universe. "So young it was—
So pale and weak—I spared its feebleness
The waste of breath."

Baldur the Beautiful

“It was well done,” avowed
The false of heart; exultant sallied forth,
Took back his birthright shape, and straight him
hied

Thither where by Valhalla faintly grew
The little shrub, scarce lifted from the root
That gave it life, too young, too weak to flower.

Ruthless he brake it from its pliant stem,
Close hid it in the hollow of his palm,
And sped him where the Æsir jubilant
Their sport pursued, Baldur its goal and crown—
Baldur the perfect, fashioned all of love,
Baldur the Beautiful, surnamed the Good.

An arrow's flight away, sad-browed, as one
By Fate from common joyance set apart,
Hödur the Blind, stronger than seven, stood,
His sinewy arms light crossed above his breast.
Him Loki swift discerned and swifter sought.

The Death of Baldur

"What dost thou here?" quoth he. "Would'st
thou alone

Spare Baldur meed of honour?"

"Nay, in truth,"

Hödur made answer, "for I love him well:

He is mine only day, and all my light.

But weapon have I none; or had I such,

How should these futile eyes find way to him,

That see not their own path?"

"Stay. ' Loki urged.

"Take thine allotted pleasure. Lo, this twig—

Though small, 't is somewhat, truly. Here thou
hast 't.

Thy pole star I. Put forth thy matchless
strength—

Thine uttermost. Accord him thus much grace."

Thereat Hödur the Blind, stronger than seven,

His shadowed countenance relit and glad,

Cried out in voice new-tuned to joy: "I, too,

Baldur the Beautiful

O Baldur, dearer holding thee than all,
I fain would show my pride in thee." So crying,
As Loki guided him, struck out his arm—
His sinewy right arm—with strength of seven,
Speeding the puny missile on its way,
Unwitting whither. And before the breath
That shaped the words had spent its gentleness,
Pierced through and through to the great heart
of him,
Baldur the Beautiful lay dead.

Woe! Woe!

Ah, woe in Asgard! Woe to all the worlds!
Death the unconquerable has entered Heaven.
Black horror shook the air. Chaos uprose
From farthest Hel, distort and monstrous.

Fear

Froze every breath, cast every limb in stone.
Aghast, undone, the Æsir palsied stood,
With anguished eyes fast fixt where Baldur lay—
A fallen star, in his own light enshrouded,

The Death of Baldur

And coffined in the darkness of the world.
Hödur, alone amid them undistraught,
Still smiling soft, joy not yet gone from him,
Hearkened, anticipant, for answering sign,
Till suddenly the silence smote on him
As it had been a blow. Doubt, dread, despair
Gripped him and drave him forward. Thus he
came,
Precipitate, with stumbling senseless feet,
On Baldur prostrate, bent down groping hands,
And in the agony of knowledge gave
His being up, with clamorous groans that rang
Reverberant through the wide vaults of Heaven.

Then such a cry went out from all the gods
As shook the Hel-bound root of Yggdrasil,
And tore the embedded anchors of the skies
From every mooring loose. "Woe! Woe!"
they cried.

"Baldur the Beautiful! Baldur the Good!

Baldur the Beautiful

Baldur, our Brother!" And the universe
Rocked like a leaf, while on his lonely throne,
Odin, the All-Father, veiled his stricken face.

Lo, then, like mariners on Northern seas,
Who through the rift of storm-rent clouds behold
The midnight sun, so were the Æsir ware
Of Frigga in their midst, stiller than death,
Mantled in such divinity of grief
That awe fell on them like a mailed hand
Compelling them to silence, while her words
So reached their consciousness as if to each
His own voice whispered to him in his soul.

"That son most swift, most sure, let him take
steed

And spare not spur, nor stay him day nor night
For love nor hate, for life nor death, until
He slacken rein in Hel, and there demand
Ransom for Baldur, so he come again
To Asgard, that again the worlds have light,

The Death of Baldur

That Yggdrasil bear leaves, and Heaven be
Heaven."

As lightning leaps amid the brooding clouds,
Out from the Æsir Hermod leapt forthwith—
Hermod the Fleet, whose foot no wing outflew—
And swore by Odin's puissant scimitar
To sate nor thirst nor hunger, nor to seek
Sleep's intimate refreshment, ere in Hel,
From Hela, odious ruler of the nine
Unhappy lands, he won great Baldur back.
And as at stir of spring's awakening sap
Boughs bare as bones, flaming to sudden bloom
Are wreathèd halls for hidden choristers
That fill the air with ecstasy, so Hope
Flowed re-creating through the Æsir's veins
At Hermod's oath, and all their blood ran wine.

From Odin's throne imperious command
Then came that ash-grey Sleipnir, first of steeds,

Baldur the Beautiful

For Frigga's envoy should accoutred be—
Sleipnir, whom none but Odin yet bestrode—
Sleipnir the marvellous, the double-limbed,
Who trod the ether as 't were pastured earth—
The swift beyond compare, each leap a flight
Immeasurable, each breath a molten flame.
Joyous sprang Hermod to the massive back ;
So, for a pulse beat, in his brothers' sight
Stood imaged, straight as fir on mountain top,
While to the goddess suppliant eyes he bent,
Mutely petitioning a signalled grace.
Then by the look she gave him panoplied
Against aught ill, he spake in Sleipnir's ear,
Dropped the loose line upon his stormy mane,
Struck spur, and vanished like a meteor, whilst
The Æsir's shout still thundered down the dark.

II
THE JOURNEY TO HEL

II

THE JOURNEY TO HEL

THE ÆSIR'S CHORUS

Fast! Ride fast!
Storm rides with thee!
The shrieking blast
Thy bugle be,
The long slant rain
Of the hurricane
Thy javelin.
The race begin!

Be the swiftest star
Thy chariot wheel;
The lightning's bar
Step for thy heel;

Baldur the Beautiful

Yon comet wear
To plume thy hair;
Mid crash and din
The tilt begin!

Ride fast! Ride well!
Death jousts with thee—
The Queen of Hel
Thine enemy.
Pay utmost toll
For Baldur's soul.
Or die! Or win!
The fight begin!

Sleipnir sped on. With his first mighty leap,
Asgard, the bright-built city, silver-walled,
Shone faintly from the distance, like a gem
Lost in the gloom; Bifröst, the Rainbow Bridge,
With burning central rib of ruby fire,

The Journey to H'el

No more was than a smoking shadow; Midgard
A pallor sketched against the dimness. On
And on rushed Sleipnir, every beat of hoof
A lightning flash, a whirlwind every breath;
And high upon him, straight as masted pine,
Hermod, with brow that bent nor right nor left,
And proud eyes unaffrighted, while the stars,
Told off like milestones, measured one by one
His course through space.

Now was the outmost sphere
Only a golden memory dissolved
In nothingness. His eye where e'er it fell
Found black, bleak, bitter night—a darkness
fierce,
Defiant, treacherous, before advance
Retreating as a wave retreats, to close
In after with an all-engulfing rush
And drown resistance—darkness horrible,
Massed here and yon in denser blurrings—
vague

Baldur the Beautiful

Colossal shapings supernatural,
Ungodly and unhuman—ambushed fiends,
Plotting enormities.

More swift and more,
Fleeter than wind, than time, than thought
itself,

Sleipnir with Hermod raced adown the dark :
Nine timeless days fled down the frozen deep—
Nine days wherein no sun was, midnights all,
Where was no moon, nor any glint of star,
Ninefold more bitter grown each sequent hour.
Caparisoned in sheeted ice the horse :
Congealed to opals every geyser breath :
And on his back Hermod, a marble god
White as the wind-whipped foam, his plumèd
head
Held high as light on beacon tower, his eyes
Flinging their challenge fearless on to Hel.

Nine days he rode—a measureless time of dread

The Journey to Hel

Unfathomable. Then faintly gleamed at last
Across the blotted darkness, like a thread
Swung from a spider's loom, the Bridge of Gjöll,
Spanning Death's turbid river in an arch
Of tenuous gold; there, twenty leagues below,
The mad black billows, torn with ghastly pangs,
Flow whence none know nor whither, flinging far
Their jetty spume upon the quavering air.
Straight o'er the slender scintillating line
Flew Sleipnir, and each hoofbeat on the gold
Crashed like a falling tower. At the noise
Up rose the warder maiden, Modgurdur,
Unmatched for comeliness and strength. Amazed,
Hermod she saw, and called to him with voice
Like rush of mingling waters. "Who art thou
That living ridest sole upon the Bridge,
Which, yester, five score dead men serried
crossed,
And shook it less than thou?"

Nor right nor left

Baldur the Beautiful

Looked Hermod, nor drew rein, but dropped a
word

As sea-gulls, soaring, drop a loosened plume.

“For Baldur’s sake I, Hermod, ride the Way
Of Death. Hast seen him pass?”

“Yea, verily.

It was as Heaven had lightened in my face.”

“What way went he?”

She signed with lifted arm,
White-gleaming, as ’twixt flying clouds by night
Shimmers the Milky Way. “Northward, to
Hel.

Yet tarry thou, I prithee.” Honey-sweet
And warm her breath stole through the gloom.

But left

Nor right looked Hermod, nor drew rein. And
on

Swept Sleipnir, fronting a blast whereto all
winds

The Journey to Hel

That yet had blown were but an idle draught,
Till, on the farther verge of that abyss
Whose bottom is the space beyond the stars,
Loomed up, immense, appalling, mountain high,
And barbed with poisoned swords that fouled the
air,
The hideous, brazen, thrice-barred gates of Hel.

Down flung him Hermod, tightened girth and
bit,
Laughed out, sprang reckless up, once and again
Cried Baldur's name; then, as an eagle soars
And swoops, so Sleipnir with gigantic vault
Cleared the vast pile, nor grazed the topmost
blade,
And rooted stood within the drear domain
Of Death, each strong limb quaking. Down
from his back
Leapt Hermod, with triumphant shout that ere
His foot attained the sod was cut in twain

Baldur the Beautiful

Like a snapt harp-string. Silent then and dumb
Beside his sweating, palpitating horse
He stood at gaze, unknowing what he saw,
And for a space the semblance felt of fear.

Cavernous gloom, like midnight filtering
Through hollowed ice, cloaked all the desolate
place

In mystery of impenetrable shade,
Chill with a cankered damp unpurged by sun,
A dark no dawn should morrow, in whose hold
Ambiguous and indeterminate,
Lurked all imaginable chance of ill—
A terror of suggestion half conceived.
And o'er it, like the folded shroud on dead
Stark breast, lay silence awful, absolute,
Empty of calm as fear is void of peace,
A stillness as of anguish-packed suspense
Before impending doom.

While thus he stood

The Journey to Hel

Transfixed, with widened eyes that naught discerned,

Sudden the immensity of loneliness

Rushed on him, caught him by the throat and held

As 't were a thing alive and palpable;

And lo! from out the infinite vacancy

Came to him his own ghost—a self unknown,

Naked and importune confronting him—

They two alone in that vast emptiness;

And, awed, he looked his bared soul in the face

And was aghast, knowing it was himself

He chiefest feared.

As then his sight undimmed,

Far as the straining eye could reach, he saw

The torpid ether teem with shadowy souls

As teems a shaft of sun with sliding motes—

Myriads and myriads of ignoble souls,

The miserably dead, unslain in fight,

Thin outlined like a breath upon the air,

Baldur the Beautiful

Passing, repassing, helpless wandering,
Unanchored by desire, intent, or will.
Ice-wraiths they seemed, blown into vaporous
 shapes
From grey dissolving mists, noiseless as clouds,
Each drifting past the other with no sign;
Each to the other naught, as winds that meet;
Each companied in its drear solitude
By its dead self.

Astonished, thus he saw,
And for a moment's shame felt coward fear
Clutch at his breast. In wrath he freed himself
From the ungodly thrall; then first perceived
Through the prodigious dusk a faint far ray
Of promise strangely sweet, and toward it strode.
Transcendent waxed the brilliance, and he wot
Its midmost ecstasy was Baldur's soul,
Irradiating love and joy and peace
In rich effulgence, making even in Hel
A Heaven ineffable. Beside the root

The Journey to Hel

Of ageless Yggdrasil he glorious stood,
God of all beauty and all goodness, which
Eternally are one, his splendour now
No more obscured by veiling flesh, ablaze
As the full sun when clouds are overpast.
Lo, in that light supernal, as within
A holy womb, had been a miracle
Of birth. Deep stirred, the root of Yggdrasil,
The Ash-tree Yggdrasil, branched forth anew;
Dead leaves at the imperious call revived;
Soft mosses creeping came with velvet tread;
Sweet sun-warmed scents and half-heard wood-
land sounds
Indefinite as sea-shell murmurings,
Made all the air a trembling ravishment;
Wan buds awoke, took back their laid-by bloom
And breathed out shaken raptures; buried
brooks
Broke their white tombs, flung their cold cere-
ments off,

Baldur the Beautiful

Leapt laughing to the light, and sang aloud
The wondrous resurrection song of Spring;
And one by one, drawn helpless thitherward
Like sun-sucked mists, the shivering dead souls
Stretched out pale palms to the celestial gleam,
And on its burning edge hung quiveringly,
A nimbus round the flame; while nigher still,
Included wholly in its radiance,
A shape, diverse from these and godlier,
Depended motionless, so subtly mixt
With the enfolding light as scarce therefrom
Discernible, and Hermod knew the beam
For Hödur's thrice blest soul.

Near by, in state
Preposterous, befitting birth so foul—
Sister to Fenrir and to Jörmungard—
Grim Hela sat, Hel's most ill-favoured Queen,
Ruler of all unslain on battlefield,
The ingloriously, pitifully dead:
Nor could even Baldur's brightness re-illumine

The Journey to Hel

Her livid form to hue less horrible.
On Hermod full she bent her rancorous gaze,
And as the Gorgon's snake-encircled brow
Transformed to stone who ventured glance
thereon,
So blackened Hel at the bare sight of her.

"How darest thou, unsummoned, with no taint
Of death upon thee, thus my realm invade?"
The words clashed out like rudely crossing
swords.

"What here thy purpose?"

Courteous he bent
The knee. "At Frigga's hest, great Queen, I
come,

Nor will delay to leave thee, so thou grant
Baldur the Beautiful with me return—
Baldur the Beautiful, our best beloved.
Thus only shall the lamentations cease
In Asgard, where the gods die day by day

Baldur the Beautiful

Bewailing him who makes our sum of Heaven."

Thereat laughed Hela, and upon the sound
A shudder tore through Hel. "Lo, now,"
scoffed she,

And harsh her voice as iron meeting iron,
"Shall I win proof if Baldur verily
Be loved as thy unbridled speech proclaims.
Bid everything that draws the breath of life
Throughout the universe—nay, all that is,
Ev'n an it breathe not—bid all weep for him,
Compelling his re-birth with suppliant tears:
Then to the Æsir will I him restore,
That Asgard know again its vaunted Heaven,
And every faded star shine forth anew.
But doth one only shed no saving drop—
One only of the seething multitudes
Refuse that bidden sign—he here remains,
Unransomed, unredeemed, our flower of Hel."

"Oh, grace unparalleled! Oh, golden grief,

The Journey to Hel

Itself the ransom of the woe it weeps!"

Cried Hermod, ravished. "O unbending Queen,

The eternal love of all the gladdened worlds

Reward thy clemency. Baldur is ours!

Baldur once more is ours!"

"Nay, by the gods,"

Swore Hela, "so soon is it not fulfilled.

Go thou, for I have said, and it abides."

Again she laughed. Again the floor of Hel

Shook, terrified.

Hermod on Baldur gazed,

And Baldur smiled on him; and with the smile

Shut in his heart, Hermod on Sleipnir sprang,

Cried to him once: "For Baldur's sake thy
best!"

Nor needed second spur; o'erleapt the gates,

And journeyed back the awful Way of Death.

But lo! its nameless terrors were as naught;

Nor cold, nor dark, nor any thirst he knew;

And the long course of starless nights and dawns

Baldur the Beautiful

A single perfect moment was to him,
So did hope master time and circumstance.

As thus he came to Asgard, silver-built,
That erst shone in mid-Heaven like a sun,
Now dull and dim as an unlighted moon,
The White God, Heimdall, watching from afar,
Caught up the Gjallar Horn, and blew a blast
Surpassing ev'n that seven-day trumpet blare
Laid Palestine's beleaguered city low;
Twice valorously he blew; and ere 't was done
Re-echoing mid the stars, the Æsir all
Across Bifröst, the burning Rainbow Bridge,
Came swift as meteors flung athwart the sky
From fiery hearted August's catapult.
Scarce greater joy Laodamia showed
Her risen lord, re-lent for three hours' grace,
Than they to Hermod. The famèd Florentine
On his high pilgrimage was not so sore
Beset by starving shades for tale of friends

The Journey to Hel

Long since dispaired, as now the god for word
Of Baldur; nor more swift those shadows
plucked

The whole from scantiest beginnings, than
The Æsir wrested from him at a breath.

Then each, in tempered grief, as seers who hail
The desired end beyond a path of pain,
Cried out aloud with meed of moistened lids,
And struck their spears against their glassy
shields

Till all the air was rent with silver sounds;
While clear above the tempest of their cries
Rang forth the slow sad strains of Frigga's
dirge,

Tender with longing inexpressible.

FRIGGA'S DIRGE

Weep, weep for Baldur dead!

For light, for beauty sped!

For fairness from all fair things fled!

Baldur the Beautiful

Gone is our summer with its flush of flowers,
 Its purpled plains,
 Its sunset stains.
Gone are its brooks, that babbled in green
 bowers,
Its misted dawns, its scented dew and showers,
 Its rainbowed rains—
The glory of its golden hours
 Endarkened wholly.
Gone, gone our light of life and love!
No more the iris-breasted dove,
Melodiously melancholy,
Croons o'er its plaint within the curtained
 grove.
No daring wing the distance cleaves.
No moth its gossamer shroud unweaves.
No wind-awakened, lisping leaves
Whisper their pleasure o'er and o'er
As Day unbars her lattice door,

The Journey to Hel

Night swooning at her knee :
No more the sunbeam's glittering ball
Rebounds from silver shield and wall,
Drops from the dome o'er Gimli's Hall,
Or flashes from the sea.

No more! no more!
Evil hath laid its curse
Across our universe.
Lost is the god whom we implore.

Gloom and Despair
Foul fruitage bear,
And ice sheets cover
The stark worlds over.
Unstarred our eves; unsunned our noons;
Silent our skalds; forgot our runes;
Daytime and night are one.
Adown the desperate years
We call with steadfast tears.
No bitterer Hel can be

Baldur the Beautiful

Than Heaven, missing thee,
Baldur—our life! our sun!

From highest heights now fell the All-Father's
voice

Surcharged with lonely grief majestic,
Bidding the gods, as light and life they loved,
Speed forth whithersoever sun revolved
Or atom stirred, and cast command abroad
That all things to full measure of their love
For Baldur, now bewail him long and sore
With free-spent tears, if haply by such grace
Might Fate and Ragnarök forfended be.
And with the uttering of that word of dread,
On a slow sigh the great voice ebb'd away,
As sighs and ceases a receding wave;
And silence held its breath for what should come.

III
RAGNARÖK

III

RAGNARÖK

NO fleeter follows echo on the sound,
Than sprang the gods at Odin's summons forth,

Obedience and love conjoined, in speed
Outvying each his jealous brother god.
Comets a-race with comets, suns with suns,
Less swift had traversed space, and in a breath
Throughout the universe their word was told.

Grief hath been in the world since time began,
Life's first and latest birthright; every soul
Hides somewhere its unplumbed abyss of pain.
But never yet was lamentation known
Like this for Baldur, nor through time to come

Baldur the Beautiful

In sorrow's annals shall again be writ.
No eye withheld the desired sign of dole.
Not Dante did so weep for Beatrice;
Not Niobe bedewed her marble feet
With bitterer tears for all her children slain;
Nor did forsaken Dido on her pyre
More plentiful a show of sorrow make.
Neither were hearts of human mould alone
Moved to complaint. Even the merciless
 beasts,
Missing their moons, most piteous mourned.
 The birds
Re-tuned their chants to brooding threnodies
Sad as were his who wept Eurydice
Yea, ev'n the careless blundering things that
 creep,
Or whirl, or swim, forgot their fretting wants
Before that greater want of all the worlds.
No farthest sun but shed a glittering tear,
Bedewing arid space with grief. The sky

Ragnarök

Was all a sprinkle of wet stars. Bifröst
Pellucid gleamed through veil of jewelled spray.
The heavy-hearted clouds trailed low, and wept
In dreary monotone of melancholy;
Deucalion from Parnassus' sacred peak
Saw not so sad a flow. The drooping night
Shook moisture from her plumes. Each dew-
tipped leaf
Quivered beneath its load, and every flower
Treasured within its heart a fragrant tear.
No grass-blade but uphung the crystal sign.
No trembling tree but somewhere pricked its
veins
And bled an amber drop. The rivers ran
Hoarse with long sobbing. The disquiet winds
Wailed out their heartache through the sighing
pines.
The pale mists wavering pressed from bole to
bole
Like the dim exhalation of a prayer.

Baldur the Beautiful

The seas upon the shingles crashed and broke,
Thundering out their woe. The shivering
sands

Whispered their sorrow o'er and o'er again
In ceaseless repetition through slow hours.
The heavy breeze crept, damply odorous,
Along the sodden ground. The very earth—
The very rocks—sweated and groaned with
grief,

And everywhere uprose the breathless cry—
“Baldur the Beautiful—the Good—return!”

As now the Æsir, satisfied and sure,
Their mission well completed, rode at ease
Their frothing chargers o'er the Bridge Bifröst
Toward Asgard bent, Bragi the Silver-Mouthed,
Wand'ring apart with heedless rein, his lips
Outbreathing Baldur's name unwittingly
As when a slumbering bird dreams out a song
Softer than memoried music, chanced upon

Ragnarök

A quarried cell bewrayed by noisome stench
From rotting vines and oozing carrion heaps.
There, mid the dizzy shadows and the drip
Of mouldy walls where moist misshapen things
Or crawled, or lurked in foul black-crustéd
webs,
Squatted inert upon a loathsome mat
Of woven snakes sat Thaukt, her lurid eyes
Twin torches lighting up the purple gloom
With baleful fire that withered aught it
touched.

Bragi, amazed, in haste unhorsed himself,
And bending his bright head, unhelmeted,
To match the meaner compass of the vault,
Found way within, and so contrived his tale
As best should wing it past a careless ear
To the heart's full conception. Thaukt, the
hag—

She who sat, squalid, on the pulsing mat—

Baldur the Beautiful

Unmoved transfixed him with her cold bright
eye.

"Naught, quick or dead, gain I by gift of tear
For Baldur slain," churlish she answered him.

"Let Hela hold what 's hers."

"Boundless thy gain,"

Bragi avowed, "regaining Baldur's soul—
Light for thy murk, beauty and joy and good
For this thy misery and gracelessness."

"To mole or bat the night is fair as noon,"
Sneered Thaukt. "That which by choice is mine,
as good

And beautiful already me beseems.
I crave not Baldur back. Till Ragnarök
Let Hela hold what 's hers."

"Nay," Bragi urged;

And as the wind, with age-long griefs endued,
Falters and breaks and fails and grieves again,
So shook his voice, freighted with sympathy.

Ragnarök

"If not for thine own need, grant but a tear
In pity for the need of all the worlds."

"What is 't to me," she flung athwart his speech
With snarling tongue, "though craven dogs
night-long

Bay hopeless at the moon? Pities the sea
The shore its white lips suck? Pities the storm
The wheat its sickle slays? Pities the flame
The thing it feeds upon? Pities the gale
The leaf, the frost the flower, the worm the fruit?
Then wherefore I the grief that is not mine?"

"Not thine?" he challenged. "Sure mine ear
mistook!

Is not one spirit father of the worlds,
Through heritage of whose informing breath
All are akin? As rivers seek the main,
Merged evermore in its immensity,
Quickening currents of a common heart,

Baldur the Beautiful

So soul seeks soul, blending in brotherhood,
Eternally interfused, eternally one—
A single pulse, athrob through myriad veins.
How then shall not another's woe be thine,
His pain thy pain, his need thine inmost own?"

"Not so," she said. "My life alone is mine.
Leave me unvext."

Then he, incredulous
That thing so weak held power to uncreate
A scheme so potent, bared of patience, cried:
"No life is his alone that lives it! Each
Imports to all, and all import to each,
Bound by the self-same law of fellowship
That links the suns each to his neighbour star.
Who art thou that deniest brotherhood?
How hast so unlearnt love, forgot compassion,
Severed the time-old chain 'twixt thee and
thine?
Who art thou?"

Ragnarök

“By thy showing, Hate am I,
And Misery my chosen dwelling-place,”
Gibing she answered from the hissing snakes.
“Curse thee, begone! Room is not in my breast
For love, nor pity, nor desire of good.”

“Now by my sword that leaps within its
sheath,
Here will I slay thee in thy monster blood!”
Swore Bragi, fiercely gripped with sudden wrath.
Then calmer spake, minded her yet to win.
“I err. Forgive. Hate slain were not love
shown.
Naught boots thy death. Flawless and perfect
love
Alone may ransom Baldur's perfect soul.
How win thee to that love? How pity teach
For need thou hast not known?”

Lo, as he ceased,
And silence fell between them for a space,

Baldur the Beautiful

From Midgard rose the sorrowing peoples' cry,
A low sad plaint bewailed from star to star,
And lost upon the void in shattered sounds.

THE CRY OF THE PEOPLES

Splendour of all the worlds, O Light
 The brightest suns transcending,
Vast as thy glory is our night
 Unstarlit and unending.
Like wandering souls a-craze with thirst
 From waste savannas crying,
By phantom oases accurst,
 Who dream they drink while dying,
So we, blind-eyed and terror-bound,
 Groping through gloom supernal,
Dream that our faltering feet have found
 Source of thy springs eternal.

Splendour of all the unsunned spheres,
 Shine down these desert spaces!

Ragnarök

Strike from our souls the numbing fears—

The horror from our faces.

Darkness entombs us as in stone,

Heart sealed from heart for ever.

Each wind-breath bears a smothered moan.

Hope lifts her beacon never.

Oh, though all else the Norns deny,

Allow our last petition!

Light! Light! Give light, or grant we die!

Death—or immortal vision!

“Didst heed?” asked Bragi. “Needs there
aught beside?”

Canst still withhold the succour of thy tears?”

“Avaunt!” she said, and spat upon the ground.

“Thou weariest me.” And through grim lower-
ing lids

Her fiery eyes burned knowledge in on him.

“Loki!” appalled he cried. “Loki! Loki!

Baldur the Beautiful

For all thy strange misshapement, it is thou!
Loki! O Cruelty incorporate!
Oh, blacker than the blasted Elves of Dark!
Accurst! Accurst!"

 "That which I am, I am
Immortally. Hela shall keep her own,"
Said Thaukt, and malice glittered in her face.
And now not Thaukt, but Loki, towered there,
His beauteous form upon the coiling snakes
Mounted as on a throne, his evil eyes
Lit with the inextinguishable fire
Of hate triumphant, his god's shape distort
With joy ungodly, power malignant, grace
Ungraced, beauty for aye undeified.
And Bragi knew—the certitude proclaimed
As by a searing bolt—Baldur the Good
For ever lost to Asgard. Thereupon,
Voicing an unendurable despair,
From his racked breast broke cry so piercing
 shrill

Ragnarök

That all the homeward-wending Æsir heard.
Dismayed, quick scenting sorrow and defeat,
They flung their chargers round, and straight
and swift

As shredded clouds that fly before the gale,
Sought out the sound, and at the cavern's
mouth

Formed crescent-wise, a glistening company
Of shining shields, their lifted lances like
A silver palisade, each splendid brow
In miserable suspicion sternly set.

There, at their hands, justly unmerciful,
Loki, as once Prometheus, met his doom—
To three torn crags bound trebly fast with
thongs

From out his agonising vitals wrought,
While close suspended o'er his shuddering flesh,
A serpent drop by drop spilled down its gall.
And as the isles shook when Enceladus

Baldur the Beautiful

'Neath Ætna stirred, so quaked the palsied
world
At every throb of his tormented frame.

O Ragnarök! O Twilight of the gods!
O Day of Odin feared! Till Ragnarök
Shall Loki's doom endure. Till Ragnarök
Shall Hel hold Baldur. Odin, Odin alone,
The great All-Father, in his prescient heart
Foresees its boded terrors. Bitter woe
Shall herald that late dawning; horror and
crime
Shall walk the highway bare and unashamed,
Kinship forgotten in fierce greed of gain.
Then seasons of unconquerable cold shall be
Such as no land e'er wintered—glacial frosts,
Tumultuous sword-edged winds, unhallowed
skies,
And snows from all four corners of the world,

Ragnarök

With flakes as linted clouds. Then prodigies
Vast and calamitous shall follow swift—
Fenrir, the giant wolf, swallow the sun,
Hati devour the moon, and Jörmungard
Vomit envenomed floods, stars drop like rain,
Midgard scatter its hills as dust, its seas
Toss out as bursting bubbles. In that hour,
After uncounted ages still to dawn,
Shall Heaven itself be cleft in twain, and through
The immeasurable breach, from Muspell, Land
of Light,
Shall all her sons come, Surtur at their head,
Surtur the Mighty, helmed and shod with flame,
His sword the sun outshining. And beneath
The tread of that indomitable host,
Bifröst, the Rainbow Bridge, like shivered glass
Shall crack and splinter.

Then shall Heimdall seize
The Gjallar Horn, and blow a hideous blast—
The cry of ultimate fear, whose note of doom,

Baldur the Beautiful

Beating from frightened world to world, shall
die

In utter wastes beyond. Even Yggdrasil
Shall tremble through its branched and rooted
length.

In that dread day of Ragnarök shall naught
Be unpossessed of terror.

Nathless, led

By Odin the All-Father, king of gods,
Arrayed for death in timeless majesty,
The Æsir, with Valhalla's warriors,
Shall range them on the bewildering battlefield,
Vigrid, the field of blood. There shall attend
Muspell's refulgent band, apart and still,
Proof-clad in brightness unapproachable.
And there shall gather all Hel's followers,
With Loki and his fearful progeny
Freed from their mammoth chains—Fenrir, the
wolf,

The stretch of whose vast jaws encloses Heaven,

Ragnarök

And Jörmungard, the serpent, he whose tail
The round of Earth encircles in its coil,
And Garm, the dog, worst monster of the three.

Then dazzled, blinded, frenzied, shall the gods
Rush on their doom, foe leaping upon foe
In such a conflict of inordinate strengths
As since Titanic times, when thunderbolts
Were arrows, hills were slingstones, hath not yet
Been known to story. Odin with the wolf
Shall furiously engage, nor bear himself
Less resolute than did Olympian Jove
Contending with Typhœus for his throne.
But skill nor valour shall advantage him.
For as relentless Night upon the Day
Creeps step by step, beats back the radiant
shafts

With huge black bulk opposed, stretches agape
Stupendous red-rimmed jaws and inch by inch
O'ertakes and swallows up its glory, so,

Baldur the Beautiful

With one last straight-armed thrust of flashing
spear,
Shall Odin die.

Then tenfold multiplied
Shall fury animate the warring hosts.
Fenrir, sore wounded, shall in Vidar's grip
Yield his foul breath. Thor, magic-gauntleted,
Shall slaughter Jörmungard, and ere his foot
Hath pressed nine paces onward, shall lie prone,
Stifled with its black gall. Heimdall shall leap
On Loki, and they twain, fire blent with fire,
A blazing one, as one shall fail and sink—
An extinguished flame. Ev'n thus intrepid Tyr,
With Garm in combat, shall lie dead beside
His strangled foe. So each shall seek his mate,
Inexorably armed with equal rage.
So each shall fall, victor by victim slain—
One triumph, one reward, one death for all.
Alone the sons of Muspell, radiant
With lustre insupportable, shall still

Ragnarök

Aloof and silent stand, their dazzling breath
Outblown upon the wind like fiery flowers
That blossom as they perish.

Then, ah, then
Surtur the Mighty shall unfold the gates
Of the far South! Swift from the luminous land,
Muspell, shall pour an incandescent flood
In mass and brilliance comparable to naught
The mind hath power to image, that shall sweep
From end to end of the wide universe,
Worlds, with their moons, for fuel piled on
worlds;
Suns tossed on suns; systems on systems heaped;
Meteors for sparks, comets for kindling straws;
And at the last, to the minutest ash,
Extinction absolute; space cleansed and bare.

So shall the imperfect order of the old
Be done away, as Odin, king of gods,

Baldur the Beautiful

Anguished foreknows; and from the Land of
Light,

From the bright bosom of its burning seas,
Shall rise amain a new fair firmament
Star-filled: a new sun in the highest Heaven
More glorious than all the suns that were,
And a new Earth, lovely and verdurous,
Whose day shall end not, nor whose summer fade.
And lo! a new Asgard shall be again,
With nobler halls, where greater gods shall keep
A more exalted state. And in their midst,
Won back from Hel, sceptred and crowned with
light,

Baldur the Beautiful shall live for aye,
And Night, and Hate, and Woe shall be no more.

This Odin's vast omniscient eye foresees,
Piercing futurity with wisdom bought
From Mimir's limpid well, and evermore
The knowledge like a wanton weed o'erruns

Ragnarök

The garden of his thoughts. But in his soul
He shuts the vision close, and dwells apart,
Disjoined by wisdom, from the multitude.

Thus still he sits, majestic and remote,
Upon his disillusioned, darkened throne,
Watching the moving worlds, aye and anon
Catching the gleam, intolerably bright,
From far Muspell; then bows his august head.
And murmurs: "Ragnarök!"

And still doth Heimdall blow the Gjallar Horn;
And still the Æsir their white horses ride
Across the Rainbow Bridge with idle shield
And lowered lance; still meet in Asgard's Halls,
And under mighty Yggdrasil discourse
Of great deeds done and greater yet to do—
Thor with his mallet, Tyr with handless wrist—
Reck not of Fenrir, nor of Jörmungard,

Baldur the Beautiful

Safe fettered both, with Garm, the monster
dog;

Laugh when Earth trembles under Loki's throes;
Taste of Idun's well-guarded golden fruit,
And, young again, forget dread Ragnarök—
Somewhat, as swift the centuries slip by,
Forget ev'n Baldur.

But, from Fensalir
Where Frigga sits, who listens close may note
Day following day, year following year, a sigh
Upon the fainting breeze float softly past,
May see a tear drop with the dew, may catch
A distant cry of love unutterable—
"Baldur! alas! Baldur, my son, my son!
Baldur the Beautiful! Alas! Alas!"

THE END

PRONUNCIATION

g always hard, like g in go.

j always like y in yard.

ö always like oe in Goethe.

Æsir = A'-ser.

As'-gard.

Bifröst = Bi'-fröst.

Fenrir = Fen'-rer.

Fensalir = Fen'-sa-ler.

Gjallar = Ge-yal'-lar.

Gjöll = Ge-yöll'.

Heimdall = Hīme'-dall.

Idun = E-doon'.

Jörmungard = Yör'-mun-gard.

Loki = Lo'-kee.

Mid'-gard.

Mimir = Mim'-er.

Mod'-gur-dur.

Mus'-pell.

Njörd = Ne-yörd'.

Rag'-na-rök.

Sleipnir = Slīpe'-ner.

Tyr = Teer.

Vigrid = Vig'reed.

Ygg'-dra-sil.



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